



**Temple Baptist Church**  
**Wilmington, North Carolina**  
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**Following Our Risen Shepherd**  
**John 10:1-18**

In the western world, we usually think of sheep being herded with dogs like border collies or various sheep dogs of the different “shepherd” breeds.

But in the eastern world, it was and still is different.

Picture it—a mostly barren hillside in the land of promise, dotted by the grayish-white of sheep grazing on scattered tufts of grass. As they eat their fill, the shepherd who led them there stands watch to keep predators away.

In a little while, he'll lead them to a pool of water or a well with a watering trough so they can quench their thirst.

With his staff in hand, he faithfully cares for his sheep, calling each one by name, leading them safely through the rocky passes of the hill country to food and water, all the while guarding them against predators and other dangers.

It's a special relationship, this relationship between a shepherd and his sheep.

The shepherd can tell his sheep from one another. When he has put them in the local sheepfold or pen at night, he goes the next morning and calls them each by name. They hear his voice, come to him, and follow him as he leads them out for another day of grazing.

During warm weather, he keeps them out in the fields at night. When he does, he might put them inside a makeshift pen fashioned from rocks or in one of the many caves that dot the hillsides. To keep them in and to keep predators out, he sleeps lying across the entrance, becoming the door or the gate.

If you had lived in Palestine in Jesus' time, you would have seen this picture practically every day. In fact, it's still a common sight today in Israel and Jordan—a shepherd on the hillside caring for his sheep, only now he's usually a Bedouin.

It's such a powerful picture—one that spoke to people who knew all about shepherds and sheep, and one that still speaks to us powerfully today, even if we've never seen a real shepherd. After all, for nearly three thousand years, believers have found incredible comfort and strength in times of distress in those beautiful words we read together earlier this morning: ***The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want*** (Psalm 23:1).<sup>1</sup>

This shepherd image is used time and again in the Old Testament—in the Psalms, in the accounts of the Exodus, by the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah.

It's no wonder, then, that in our text for today in John 10:1-18, *Jesus described His relationship with His people in terms of a shepherd and his sheep*, identifying Himself as ***the good shepherd***. Listen to how He paints this beautiful picture and lays out its meaning and significance . . .

**<sup>1</sup> “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. <sup>2</sup> But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup> To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup> When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. <sup>5</sup> A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” <sup>6</sup> This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.**

**<sup>7</sup> So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. <sup>8</sup> All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup> I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup> The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. <sup>11</sup> I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup> He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. <sup>13</sup> He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. <sup>14</sup> I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup> just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup> And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. <sup>17</sup> For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. <sup>18</sup> No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father.”**

This is the word of the Lord; thanks be to God!

Jesus' hearers that day would have identified readily with this image. It was a part of their everyday life. It was a part of the fabric of the religious expression and identity of Israel. Yet they didn't get it at first!

### ***In the background . . .***

Sometimes it's helpful to us to know a little bit about the background against which a Scripture was first heard.

In this case, the *timing* was important. It was early winter, when shepherds would be bringing their sheep into town at night and putting them in the sheepfolds or pens. These pens were usually attached to houses or buildings, and someone would be there through the night to keep watch. The flocks of several shepherds would usually be put together in one pen at night. In the morning, the various shepherds would come to get their sheep. They'd start singing or calling

their sheep, and the sheep would all come to their own shepherd and follow him out of the sheep pen.

Gerald Borchert, in his commentary on this passage, tells of seeing a modern-day shepherd do this very thing. He came to a sheepfold containing the combined flocks of four shepherds. He sang and called, and his sheep came out from among the others and dutifully followed him to pasture.<sup>2</sup>

So Jesus describes this picture, contrasting the true shepherd of the sheep with the thieves and bandits who try to enter the sheepfold some other way because the gatekeeper will only open the gate for the shepherds.

We know it was winter because of the timeframe John gives us. It was at ***the Feast of Dedication***, or what we know today as Hanukkah. Hanukkah always falls close to our Christmas. It's the Jewish feast that celebrates the liberation, cleansing, and rededication of the temple by Judas Maccabeus in 165 BC after it had been defiled by the Greek Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes.

Thoughts were fresh this time of year about bad shepherds (those Jewish high priests who had given in to the Seleucid rulers' efforts to make the Jews like the Greeks). There were also thoughts about good shepherds—the Maccabees, who led by their father Mattathias, then his son Judas, revolted against the Seleucids, won Israel's independence again and restored and rededicated the desecrated temple.

There was a scriptural background here as well. Scholars tell us that the Jews apparently followed a lectionary in their reading of Scripture in the synagogue services. This lectionary prescribed readings that were assigned for each Sabbath over a three-year cycle.<sup>3</sup> The readings included Old Testament passages about shepherds and sheep, and called to mind other passages with this theme. The shepherd image is present in the Psalms (23; 80:1), in Isaiah (40:11), and in Jeremiah (23:3; 31:10). But the background passage that's probably key to Jesus' words here is Ezekiel 34, which we read earlier, where the LORD condemns unfaithful shepherds and declares that He will Himself shepherd His people Israel (Ezekiel 34:15-16).

### ***The good shepherd . . .***

And so against this backdrop, Jesus talks to the people about the good shepherd, who enters the sheepfold, calls his sheep by name, and leads them out to find pasture (10:1-6). But the people don't get it.

So Jesus shifts the image to the open field in warm weather, and tells them, ***I am the door of the sheep . . . If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.*** In other words, as ***the door*** or ***the gate of the sheep*** (NIV), Jesus provides access, protection, and provision. All this is in contrast to the thieves, who come ***only to steal and kill and destroy.*** Jesus, on the other hand, has come ***that they may have life and have it abundantly*** (10:7-10).

It's interesting that Jesus says, ***I am the door.*** The way the phrase is structured in Greek is very emphatic. It wasn't usually used this way. In Greek, the verb endings identify the subject when it's a pronoun. When the pronoun is also used, as it is here, it makes it very emphatic—"I myself am the door."

Now there are at least seven "I am" sayings from Jesus in the Gospel according to John. Jesus said, ***I am the bread of life*** (6:35, 48), ***the light of the world*** (8:12), ***the resurrection and the life*** (11:25-26), ***the way, and the truth, and the life*** (14:6), ***the true vine*** (15:1, 5), and here in our text, ***the door of the sheep*** (10:7) and ***the good shepherd*** (10:11, 14).

Is John doing something more here than just emphasis? Absolutely! He's making a connection with God's response to Moses when Moses asked who he was tell the Israelites was sending him, and God responded, ***I AM WHO I AM . . . Say this to the people of Israel, "I AM has sent me to you"*** (Exodus 3:14)! This also corresponds to Ezekiel 34, where the LORD (God's personal name *YHWH*, which derives from the verb form of ***I AM***) says He will Himself shepherd His people!

Jesus draws the connection even tighter as He goes on to say, ***I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*** (10:11). All this is in contrast to the hired hand, who leaves the sheep when the wolf comes. But Jesus is the good shepherd who knows His sheep and is known by them, just as Father knows Him and He knows the Father. And because He knows and is known by the Father, He lays down His life for the sheep. He has other sheep as well that He will bring so that there will be ***one flock and one shepherd*** (or capturing the play on words in the Greek, "one sheep herd, one shepherd," 10:16). Jesus has authority not only to lay down His life, but also to take it up again, because He received this command from His Father (10:18). He's not only our good shepherd; He's *our risen shepherd!*

### ***Our risen shepherd . . .***

Now this is a powerful description of our Lord's relationship with His people, isn't it? *Jesus, our risen shepherd, knows His sheep, and through His sacrificial death and resurrection, gives them abundant life.* Think about that.

*Jesus knows His sheep . . .* He knows all about us—the good, the bad, the ugly, the deepest depths of our hearts. He not only knows *about* us, He *knows us!* And He has made Himself known so that we know Him! So we hear His voice and *follow* Him, because we know it's His voice. He leads us in His way—the way of eternal life.

*Jesus laid down His life and took it up again for His sheep . . .* He came to bring us life, and in doing so, laid down His own life. But He took up His life again in His resurrection, so that He might give us eternal life!

And *Jesus gives His sheep abundant life . . .* Life that is eternal, overflowing, more than we need—the life of the ages! As James Montgomery Boice put it in his commentary, we are "saved, safe, and satisfied" in Jesus.<sup>4</sup>

Some of the earliest works of Christian art that have been found depict Jesus as the good shepherd. This was obviously one of the favorite images of Christ for early Christians. It still is for many of us today.

After all, this good shepherd, our Lord Jesus Christ—our *risen shepherd*—knows us as His sheep, laid down His life and took it up again for us, and gives us abundant life.

No wonder so many have found so much comfort and strength in this beautiful image!

For you see, not only is He our shepherd who is leading us through this life, as the twenty-third Psalm and John 10 so beautifully put it. That would be amazing enough and so much more than we deserve, wouldn't it?

But John tells us in Revelation 7:13-17 that those in heaven who ***have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb*** worship and serve God around His throne as He shelters them with His presence, and that

***the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,  
and he will guide them to springs of living water,***

***and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.***

And to that I say, Thanks be to God! Amen!

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®.

<sup>2</sup> Gerald L. Borchert, "John 1-11" in *The New American Commentary* 25a (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 330.

<sup>3</sup> Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 168.

<sup>4</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John* 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 88-89.